

# The Sailboat of Life

## A narrative therapy inspired metaphor by Kim Billington



**Purpose:** To bring together in one drawing, using the metaphor of a sailboat, what's happening in a person's life, identifying both the challenging problems and the person's values, strengths and hopes.

**Unpacking the drawing:** The question prompts below are based on narrative therapy's invitational musings, opening up spaces to hear about stories about the problems and stories about the skills and strengths, and their history.

**Suitable** for ages 8 and above, and possible especially relatable for male clients.

**Theory:** Often there are neglected stories in people's lives: times when a person used their unique identity strengths to get through hard times, to stay afloat and to make progress in their preferred life direction. Experiences which are counter, or at odds to the problem story.

In narrative therapy, when people begin to share these 'side stories' (aka 'alternative' stories) it can often marginalise the 'problem story' and increase a person's awareness about their broader identity. What happens is that people's struggles are acknowledged, and they can begin to share stories about what is important to them.

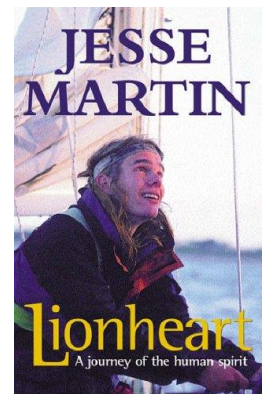
It is as if a new mirror is looked into, and the person may see new meanings about their journey and their capacities and triumphs. Often, these important stories often have a remarkable history. Self-understandings and self-compassion towards one's life can be enhanced as stories are told about these times of agency, determination, integrity and become what is called in narrative practice: sparkling moments.

Narrative enquiries may lead to people (real or fictional or heroic, four-legged or two) who are identified as contributing to one's identity. These valued others may have helped hold off isolation, have contributed skills and recognition of one's personhood, and at times may have become a light in the darkness. Cherished others in our lives can be 're-remembered' and celebrated through story telling around the how and why of their part in our lives.

Other narrative therapy metaphors well known to facilitate similar explorations include '*The Team of Life*' and '*The Tree of Life*.' These narrative practices have been designed to reduce drowning in the problem story, and to help reshape and re-author one's identity as a person, separate to the problem. Examples of how to use these are to be found in my first book, *A Counsellor's Companion*.

**How this metaphor came about:** For 15 years I had been delivering training workshops and using *The Tree of Life* in counselling and group work. I had found that sometimes people were not as keen to use the 'tree' metaphor. I discovered that using a more dynamic image, (one that was not as 'flowy with curved edges') resonated with many who related well to a technological metaphor. It felt less like 'art' and more like a 'project'.

About 10 years ago I read a book by Jesse Martin, a 16yr old who departed Melbourne for a world voyage on his yacht, *Lionheart*, in 1999 became the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe solo, non-stop, and unassisted. His 328 day journey of 50,000km was filled with moments of doubt, horror, fear and joy. At the back of the book was a glossary of terms and a diagram of the parts of the boat. I began to use the yacht metaphor and found many could relate to it regardless of sailing know-how.



I formalised this flexible tool as I have found many counsellors and youth workers enjoy some structure to start them off before making an intervention their own. Michael White and David Epston were keen that future practitioners bring their own 'spirit of adventure' to make therapeutic discoveries and share them. This tool is honouring their wishes.

I have found *The Sailboat of Life* to be helpful with engagement, curiosity and creativity. Like the other therapeutic metaphors, it does not require expert art skills or more than a pen and paper. Sometimes we can simply talk about one or two of the 'parts' of the boat to begin the conversations that reverse the downward vortex of the problem-saturated life, and recover and revise forgotten, valued aspects of a person's identity.

### **Getting started - Parts of the Boat Metaphor:**

**Draw a Sailboat:** include enough space to write a few words in the hull, the sails, a flag at top of mast, the deep sea below, and a treasure chest.

**Hull:** The sailboat's hull is similar to the roots of *The Tree of Life*, holding important people who have contributed in your life. Stories can be told about the rituals of living and life skills you have learnt from them, with key words added to the forward sail.

**Forward Sail:** Strengths, skills, values and interests that pull you forward through life can be added here.



**Rear Sail:** This is where a couple of stories of when the skills and strengths from the forward sail were used to get through a dark or difficult time. These may be where bittersweet lessons are learned. Daily lifesaving and wellbeing activities that keep a person strong can also be added here.

**Banner/ Flag:** Standing tall is the mast, and proudly aloft can be written a hope or dream that has not been lost overboard in the turbulent seas.

**Ocean Below:** Swirling waters can sometimes toss the sailboat to and fro. They can symbolise a number of life disturbances. We call them 'problems' and here we get to make an inventory of them, often a list of 8 -10 come readily to mind. Bigger ones can be written in BOLD, or use a colour to represent the impact they make on one's life. Fearful sharks can be drawn to enhance the expression of just how things are in the person's life.

**Treasure Chest:** Throughout life's ups and downs, we grow and learn from our experiences. We gather these hard-won gold and treasures, and possibly can offer them to others in their time of need.

### **Extension Opportunities:**

The flexibility of this sailboat metaphor is that it has almost limitless possibilities to open new conversations about a person's self-care, reaching-out practices, knowledges, life choices and understandings.

**Responding to changes in the weather:** When is a good time to tack? When must we lower the sail, even in a strong breeze? Why don't you simply use the biggest sail all the time? What do you see as the contributing aspects of your genoa? What do you do when the barnacles need clearing from the keel? What becomes important to you when you are subject to waves over 4m high out at sea?

**Meaning:** The wind can be your friend or your foe. It's something you can't control, but using your small and large sails, you have quite a lot of influence over your speed and overall direction. What aspects of sailing your boat have you most control over?

**Movement Forwards:** Below 5 knots the wind is too light and manoeuvring and powering a boat with the sails may become difficult. Centuries ago, sailors dreaded 'the doldrums'. How do you manage to endure when you are not progressing towards your hopes or goals?

**People Onboard:** Who have you chosen to have around you as your crew? What is it about them that you value? What do you offer them? (Questions from *The Team of Life* are helpful here)

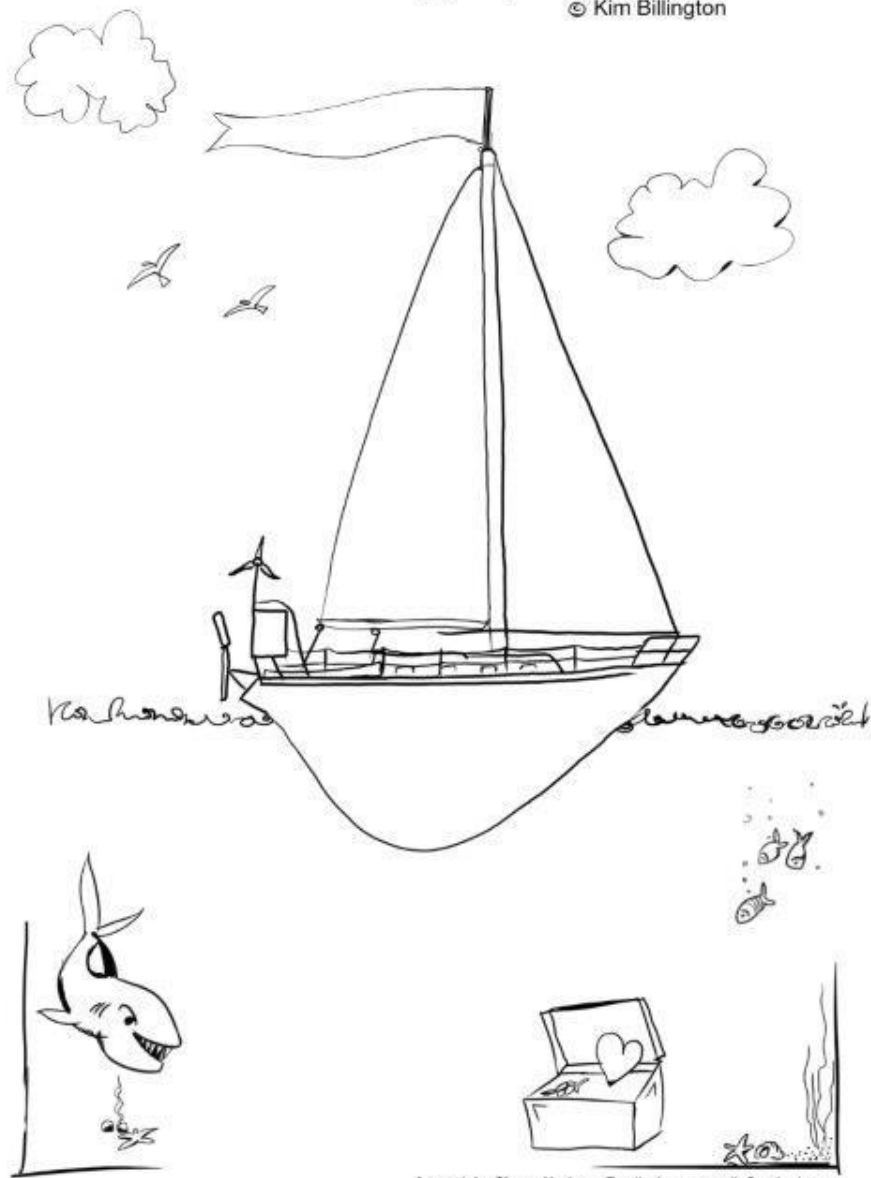
**Safety:** Would you recommend sailors head out with a personal distress beacon? When is the best time to activate one? Why would you bother having one? Who should be exempt from wearing a safety harness?

How do you best respond when you see a lighthouse identifying rocks ahead, or your map says the channel ahead is shallow? What things have you put in place previously to save your skin? Is there anything that cannot be repaired given the right know-how and team support?

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## References:

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